

## September 10, 2006; Dedication of New Building

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Scripture: 1 Chronicles 29: 1-22; Psalm 78:1-4; James 2: 1-17; Mark 14: 1-11; Mark 12: 41-44 and 13: 1-8; 33-37

Why have a church building? Jesus didn't have one, did he? Why spend all that money? Wouldn't money spent on church buildings be better spent on shelters or medicine or given to the poor?

There has been a church building on this site since 1821. First Church of Christ in Bangor used to stand here. It was a mission church, founded in this tiny, struggling community on the edge of the Maine woods. It began with four families. They met in city hall. They wanted and knew they needed a meetinghouse. Finally they built, on this very hill, a small, but typical, clapboard structure. There were many other needs, poverty, disease and hardship, but even in those dangerous and brutal beginnings, Christians in this city had a church building. Undoubtedly there were those who scoffed, thought they were fools and said so; thought a church building was a waste of time and money. But they knew what they needed—and what the city itself needed. They built a church.

When that meetinghouse burned, they built another one. Later they expanded it. It burned in 1911. That was the great Bangor Fire. Six church buildings were destroyed in that fire—including First Church and Central Church (near here on French Street). Many families of First Church and Central Church lost home *and* business—as well as their church buildings—in that terrible fire. The city lost its library, its high school, and the heart of its commercial life. You almost hear the people—who knew their Scripture pretty well—saying those poignant and powerful words from Isaiah [64:11], *Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.*

But from the ruins, by free gifts from what they had left in the world, and in hope for the future of their city, Central and First churches came together and built another meetinghouse: the one we are in today.

When this building was dedicated in 1913, Dr. C.H. Cutler took his text from the Book of Haggai (2:9, King James Version): *The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the LORD of hosts: and in this place will I give peace....* In the sermon, he said:

The architect's design: the builder's toil, the care and thought that goes into the building, the gifts of the people . . . [and] the spirit of self-sacrifice which they involve and express: all these surely constitute a religious work. This house of worship could never have been built without the self-denying, self-sacrificing spirit of this people. No relatively large subscriptions were made at the outset, nor, I believe, have been made . . . since, and had it not been for the many willing offerings of the average, even the small givers, which have cost, in terms of self-denial, how much, only the Master knows...this noble house of worship could not have been built at all. Moreover, the building of such a temple is a religious act, not only because . . . it springs from deep religious instinct and expresses and embodies the spirit of self-sacrifice, but because the house of God so conceived and so dedicated, is itself an inspiration and an aid to worship.<sup>[1]</sup>

Jesus did not have a church building in which to preach; true enough. But we know he attended ordered worship and prayer. Luke [4:16, Revised Standard Version] tells us, *And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day.* Jesus was often in the synagogue in Capernaum. I have been in the ruins of a synagogue on that site, just up the street from Simon Peter's house. It was a very beautiful place, adorned in lovely, even lavish ways,

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<sup>[1]</sup> Rev. Dr. C. H. Cutler, "A Notable Sermon," *Bangor Daily News*, December 1, 1913, p. 14.

clearly the result of great investment of the gifts of the faithful people of God. Jesus went in to these houses of prayer and study regularly. It was his custom. He left this example to us—and to his disciples. We know they continued in synagogue services and in attendance at the great Temple in Jerusalem—as Jesus did, too.

In the cities where Paul founded congregations...the Jews had probably already advanced to the stage of possessing buildings used exclusively for the community's functions. The sorts of activities in the meetings [included] scripture reading and interpretation, prayers, [and] common meals.<sup>2[2]</sup>

Early urban Christians met on the synagogue model. Some met in homes at first, but it was not long until they established meeting places, like synagogues, for study, prayer, worship and common meals, including, of course, the most sacred meal of all, Holy Communion. They knew—as we continue to affirm—that Christians need a place—a center and a gathering—for the life of faith. We need, as Jesus did, a place set apart for sacred use to go to—as a custom.

And what of the poor? Well, poor Christians know the same things all Christians know. They need a place of meeting, a place of assembly if they are to become spiritually rich. In Nuevo Sacramento, Honduras, where our All Souls mission teams have been going for years, the first common building the villagers built after the hurricane's destruction was a church. They call it Iglesia Boutista Getsemani—the Gethsemane Baptist Church, its name recalling Jesus' agony in the garden before his betrayal and crucifixion. More than that, while their church building was still brand new, the Christians of Nuevo Sacramento went to the neighboring village to help them—poor as they all were—build their church.

When we were there, the church was a place of worship, of prayer and singing; it was the community center, a Bible school, a clinic. It is the place in that village that brings the body of Christ together and allows that body to do the work of Christ about which James reminds us in his letter.

In Eastport, we work with fellow Christians in churches there where we share common meals, worship and prayer. We spent one week painting a church. Some would say that was a waste of time and money. But Christians know better. Churches are places for the body of Christ, where we feast on him, and from which he leads us back into a world of need.

When Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus with expensive oil, many people—including some of his own disciples—complained at her extravagance.

'Why was the ointment thus wasted?' they complained. 'For this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor.' And they reproached her. But Jesus said to them, 'Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me.' [Mark 14: 4-7, Revised Standard Version]

Church buildings are places of beauty. Many are places of physical beauty, all of them strive to be places of spiritual beauty, of self sacrificial giving, of service, and of the worship of God "in the beauty of holiness". Jesus welcomed at least one act of extravagant waste expended on him—that expensive anointing. He welcomed it because he is much less enamored of money that we are. He knows that we often think of beautiful acts as a waste. It is we who think that we know best—that we know better, more worthy things, than Jesus. He cares little about money, but much about the beauty of our souls, our behavior, and our acts of extravagant giving. The poor you will always have, he says, not to denigrate the poor, but to remind both the rich and the poor that it is he who is the creator of all things and it is he in whom all things in heaven and on earth cohere. Christ is creator and Christ brings order and true wealth is different in his ordering of things than in our ideas of value. We seek to have our buildings reflect that

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<sup>2[2]</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: the Social World of the Apostle Paul*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, p. 80.

truth—and communicate that truth to all who find their way into these places of beauty. Beauty feeds the needs of the soul—the souls of the poor and the rich—who are made to respond to that beauty. Augustine of Hippo says

The beauty which flows through men’s minds into their skillful hands comes from that Beauty which is above their souls and for which my soul sighs all day and night ... (*Confessions* X.34) ... ‘Every form of unity,’ he wrote in one of his letters, ‘is a form of beauty ... There is no ordered thing...‘that is not beautiful’ (*De vera religione* xii.77) <sup>3[3]</sup>

As Psalm 133 [New Revised Standard Version] puts it, *How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!*” It is this beauty, the creation of such beautiful unity by every skill and all wisdom available to us, for which church buildings are built and for which they stand.

Congregationalists always insisted that the church was the *people*, not the building, downplaying, it seems, the sacred nature of the building. But even from our earliest days there was ambivalence. Our forebears also knew that the place, the building itself, because of its uses, was important.

Timothy Dwight was an army chaplain in the American Revolution and was recognized by General Washington. He was later a legislator, a Congregational pastor, and president of Yale (his *Alma Mater*), where he effected a religious revival that changed countless lives and won new respect for the truth and relevance of the Christian faith. One of his students remembered his broad interests from agriculture, to astronomy, to theology, and his way with people.

He was pleased to talk with lowly people as well as lofty ones—his kitchen servant, the college janitor, blacksmiths, hostlers, boatmen, ploughmen; he drew of them what they best knew, and he well paid them in kind for what they gave.” The foremost hymnologist of his time, one his hymns is still sung here and in many other churches. It is the oldest American hymn (1800) in continuous use, “I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord.” <sup>4[4]</sup>

(verse 2) I love thy Church, O God, Her walls before thee stand, Dear as the apple of thine eye, and graven on thy hand. (verse 4) Beyond my highest joy I prize her heavenly ways, Her sweet communion, solemn vows, Her hymns of love and praise.

He speaks of the *walls* of the church—certainly a physical structure—but also of the heavenly ways of the church—communion, vows, hymns of love and praise. He knew what Christians have always known: We need and desire a physical place that reflects God’s reign and order—a place that in holy mystery, holds the body of Christ, that is, the actual people of Christ and their sacred communion with Christ. We know God is not contained in any physical structure, any particular building; *still* we speak of our church as the “house of God,” or the “house of the Lord.” As James Mays, that great light of Protestant Biblical Study, has so compellingly said:

For Christians, the era when [the Ark of the Covenant in the Jerusalem Temple] were visible signs of an invisible presence of God...belong to the time of the Old Testament, but that does not mean for us that God is placeless. We exist in space and time. How could God deal with us if not through space and time made holy by divine claim? ... God dwells in heaven but he has place on earth. We ‘go’ to God. Every visit to a temple or church or meeting of believers is in a profound sense a pilgrimage. We ‘go,’ not just for practical or personal reasons; we go theologically. <sup>5[5]</sup>

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<sup>3[3]</sup> Hugh Bredin and Liberato Santoro-Brienza, *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Introducing Aesthetics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, pp. 54-55.

<sup>4[4]</sup> This section quoted freely from Albert C. Ronander and Ethel K. Porter, *Guide to the Pilgrim Hymnal*, Boston: United Church Press, 1966, pp. 217-18.

<sup>5[5]</sup> James L. Mays, “Psalms”, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994, p. 275.

Pilgrimage to God's place is a ritual of entry into God's ordering of reality and the conditions of human life.<sup>6[6]</sup>

Why a church building? Because the church is an embassy of God's government. When you enter a church, you should feel as if you are entering a different territory. The language is a little different, the customs are different, the values are different, the food is different—little cubes of bread and little cups of grape juice—how strange is this? When you go to church, you enter *God's* ordering of reality and *God's* ordering of the conditions of human life. Church not only feels different—perhaps even a little uncomfortable—it strives to actually *be* different from what lies beyond the doors. So James wrote in the letter we read from today. He says, as church members, we are under Christ's "royal law". Christ is the true king, superior to any earthly ruler. When you are in his embassy, under his rule, you submit to His royal law, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." King Jesus will judge everything. His judgment will be "sterner and milder than under the law of Moses. On the one hand, judgment will be administered without mercy to those who have shown no mercy . . . On the other hand... mercy surpasses . . . judgment: that is, for those who have practiced mercy there need be no fear of judgment."<sup>7[7]</sup>

But this law is not simple and it can't be kept alone. It requires other people, both as objects of that love and as tests of it, and it requires the assembly of Christ's people with His indwelling presence to help us know what is true, what is false, and what mercy actually looks like day to day and in the life we live among and for others. José Míguez Bonino writes:

The life of Jesus in a life of love, and *therefore* of conflict...his love is involved in the conflicting conditions of human life in which it cannot help but take part...The conflicts in which we are involved are not simply struggles between good and evil. They are ... moments ... by which God guides us to the final realization of his plan...We make a great mistake if we think we can ignore the small manifestations of love—personal compassion, consideration ...gentleness and courtesy—while fighting the great battle...The dramatic decision of the great battle and the daily duty of love are complementary and inseparable dimensions of that life which truly has a future.<sup>8[8]</sup>

A thousand years before Christ, King David said, "I'm turning over my personal fortune ... for making this place of worship for my God." Then he asked the people, "And now, how about you? Who among you is ready and willing to join in the giving?" When the gifts were tallied everyone was "full of a sense of celebration—all that giving! And all given willingly, freely! David was exuberant."<sup>9[9]</sup>

I hope that today, fellow Christians, you are full of a sense of celebration and exuberance appropriate to this occasion. All that giving! And all given freely! The people of God have been at this for a very long time, here in Bangor and across long centuries and around the world.

When this congregation organized its committees to begin asking for gifts with which to build this building, we wondered if we shouldn't create "levels of giving," so that people who gave the most money would have their names at the top of the list. How surprised we were when those large contributors said, "We don't want our names prominently displayed, written above the names of others. After all this is a church! Why is my gift more important than the smallest one? We all should give as we are able."

*Have you not made distinctions among yourselves?* James asked his people. It is encouraging that, across time and in many places—and here among us as well, by God's grace—some of the lessons of the Gospel have been learned by Christ's people.

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<sup>6[6]</sup> Mays, *Ibid.*

<sup>7[7]</sup> Bo Reike, *The Epistles of James, Peter and Jude, The Anchor Bible, Volume 37*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1982, p. 29-30.

<sup>8[8]</sup> José Míguez Bonino, *Room to Be People*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975, pp. 61-63.

<sup>9[9]</sup> Quoted from Eugene Peterson's *The Message* paraphrase of the Bible.

We began this project with the same prayer that J.S. Bach prayed before he began to write a musical composition. As he began to write, Bach wrote at the top of the page, *Jesu Juva*—"Jesus, help". As we began this work, and all through it, we prayed this prayer constantly and in many forms.

Today, on this day of great celebration, with the completion of this building, recognizing the skill and dedication of the workers, the sacrifice and beautiful hopes of Christ's people in this place, we say, as Bach wrote at the end of each of his completed works,

*Soli Deo Gloria*—"To God alone be the glory."

Amen.

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1 Chronicles 29:1-22  
[From Eugene Peterson's *The Message*]

Then David the king addressed the congregation: "My son Solomon was singled out and chosen by God to do this. But he's young and untested and the work is huge—this is not just a place for people to meet each other, but a house for God to meet us. I've done my best to get everything together for building this house for my God, all the materials necessary: gold, silver, bronze, iron, lumber, precious and varicolored stones, and building stones—vast stockpiles. Furthermore, because my heart is in this, in addition to and beyond what I have gathered, I'm turning over my personal fortune of gold and silver for making this place of worship for my God: 3,000 talents (about 113 tons) of gold—all from Ophir, the best—and 7,000 talents (214 tons) of silver for covering the walls of the buildings, and for the gold and silver work by craftsmen and artisans.

"And now, how about you? Who among you is ready and willing to join in the giving?"

Ready and willing, the heads of families, leaders of the tribes of Israel, commanders and captains in the army, stewards of the king's affairs, stepped forward and gave willingly. They gave 5,000 talents (188 tons) and 10,000 darics (185 pounds) of gold, 10,000 talents of silver (377 tons), 18,000 talents of bronze (679 tons), and 100,000 talents (3,775 tons) of iron. Anyone who had precious jewels put them in the treasury for the building of The Temple of God in the custody of Jehiel the Gershonite.

And the people were full of a sense of celebration—all that giving! And all given willingly, freely! King David was exuberant.

David blessed God in full view of the entire congregation:

Blessed are you, God of Israel, our father from of old and forever.

To you, O God, belong the greatness and the might,  
the glory, the victory, the majesty, the splendor;

Yes! Everything in heaven, everything on earth; the kingdom all yours!

You've raised yourself high over all.

Riches and glory come from you, you're ruler over all;

You hold strength and power in the palm of your hand  
to build up and strengthen all.

And here we are, O God, our God, giving thanks to you, praising your splendid Name.

"But me—who am I, and who are these my people, that we should presume to be giving something to you? Everything comes from you; all we're doing is giving back what we've been given from your generous hand. As far as you're concerned, we're homeless, shiftless wanderers like our ancestors, our lives mere shadows, hardly anything to us. God, our God, all these materials—these piles of stuff for

building a house of worship for you, honoring your Holy Name—it all came from you! It was all yours in the first place! I know, dear God, that you care nothing for the surface—you want us, our true selves—and so I have given from the heart, honestly and happily. And now see all these people doing the same, giving freely, willingly—what a joy! O God, God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, keep this generous spirit alive forever in these people always, keep their hearts set firmly in you. And give my son Solomon an uncluttered and focused heart so that he can obey what you command, live by your directions and counsel, and carry through with building The Temple for which I have provided."

David then addressed the congregation: "Bless God, your God!" And they did it, blessed God, the God of their ancestors, and worshiped reverently in the presence of God and the king.

The very next day they butchered the sacrificial animals and offered in the worship of Israel to God a thousand bulls, a thousand rams, a thousand sheep, and in addition drink offerings and many other sacrifices. They feasted all day, eating and drinking before God, exuberant with joy.

#### JAMES 2: 1 – 17

[From the Revised Standard Version]

My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "Have a seat here, please," while you say to the poor man, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you, is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme that honorable name which was invoked over you?

If you really fulfill the royal law, according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well.

But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," said also, "Do not kill." If you do not commit adultery but do kill, you have become a transgressor of the law.

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment.

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him?

If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

#### MARK 14:1-11

[Revised Standard Version]

It was now two days before the Passover and the feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth, and kill him; for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be a tumult of the people."

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head.

But there were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment thus wasted? For this ointment might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and given to the poor." And they reproached her.

But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it they were glad, and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.

This is a Gospel Lesson I thought about in preparing this sermon. I did not quote it, but only omitted it because of time constraints. It is important to think about. JLH

MARK 12:41-44; 13:1-8; 33-37  
[Revised Standard Version]

And he sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living."

And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down." And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?" And Jesus began to say to them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs.

Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Watch therefore - for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning - lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch."

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